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A Roman Marble Relief of Mithras Slaying the Bull, 2nd/early 3rd Century A.D.

Estimate

150,000 - 250,000 GBP

Sold

209,000 GBP

BIDDING IS CLOSED

Description

A Roman Marble Relief of Mithras Slaying the Bull
marble

from the innermost shrine of a mithraeum, carved in low relief with the figure of Mithras pinning the bull to the ground, pulling its head back, and plunging his knife into its forequarter, the god with head turned back and billowing mantle, flanked by diminutive figures of Cautes on the left holding a downward-turned torch, and of Cautopates on the right holding an upright torch, all wearing Eastern dress, a dog attacking the bull in front and a scorpion and serpent biting at its genitals, a bust of Sol accompanied by a raven in the upper left corner, another of Selene in the right corner, the scene framed in a border of alternating acanthus leaves and acorns, several mortises for attachment, including in the lower corner and on the underside.

Provenance

Sir Daniel Donohue (1919-2014), Los Angeles, California, acquired prior to the death of his wife Countess Bernardine in March 1968, and probably collected by her father Dan Murphy who died in 1939 (Bonhams, Los Angeles, *The Collection of Sir Daniel Donohue*, April 4th, 2011, no. 853, illus.)

Literature

Manfred Clauss, *Mithras. Kult und Mysterium*, Mainz, 2012, p. 91, fig. 61

Serena Fass, *The Magi, their Journey, and their Contemporaries*, London, 2015, pp. 300-31

Catalogue Note

For a related relief in the Naples National Museum, inv. no. 6733, see *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. VI, p. 597, no. 113, and M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, 1956, p. 103, no. 172, fig. 47.

The relief is replete with astrological symbols alluding to constellations: Cautes and Cautopates to Gemini, the dog to Canis Major or Minor, the serpent to Hydra, the raven to Corvus, the ears of grain at the tip of the bull's tail, and the scorpion to Scorpio.

According to Franz Cumont, a pioneer in the field of Mithraic studies, "Mithraic art rested at heart Asiatic, like the Mysteries of which it was the expression. Its predominating idea was not to provoke an aesthetic impression; it aimed not to fascinate, but to tell its mission and to instruct,--faithful in this also to the traditions of the ancient Orient. The jumbled mass of personages and groups which are presented on some of the bas-reliefs, the host of attributes

(...), show us that a new ideal was born with the new religion. These uncouth and unappealing symbols (...) did not allure by their elegance or nobility; they fascinated the mind by the disquieting attractions of the Unknown, and provoked in souls reverential fear for an august mystery." For a survey of more recent scholarship on the the subject see R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*, 2006.